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ABSTRACT

In contrast to the traditional curriculum for young children, a strong movement has recently encouraged children's starting formal, academic learning at an early age. This document describes three visits to preschool classes to illustrate the academic nature of classes today. In the kindergarten class visited, the whole class completed worksheets on simple subtraction and then divided into three reading groups. Two groups did workbook pages while the third group worked with a student teacher. During the visit to a Project Head Start classroom, 3- to 4-year-olds learned number concepts, shapes, and colors, and practiced writing the numeral 2. In the third classroom, a private preschool with an enrollment of ten 4-year-olds, the class dictated an experience story to the teacher and then read it over several times. Results of a survey sent to the parents of children in nursery schools, day care centers, and Head Start programs throughout South Dakota revealed that these parents, like those in other states, "want it all" for their children. According to the survey, parents reported that 3- to 4-year-olds need traditional play experiences, but they also need to begin reading, writing, and math along with learning to sit still, listen attentively, and do seat work. It is suggested that parents want children to learn the skills they perceive to be necessary for entering kindergarten and that early childhood educators need to give serious thought to this apparently national shift in parent expectations. (CB)

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TODAY'S PARENTS WANT IT ALL FOR THEIR PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

by

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For quite some time educators concerned about early education have debated what should be taught to young children in preschool and kindergarten. Traditionally, the curriculum for young children was intended to help them grow emotionally, socially, and physically. It was an active, enrichment curriculum with much emphasis on play, art, music, rhymes, and stories. Children were to learn through concrete experiences rather than abstract ones.

More recently, there has been a strong movement toward starting young children on formal, academic learning at an early age. Kindergarten has already succumbed and has lost sight of its original goals with most kindergartens today routinely teaching reading, math, and handwriting.

The dispute has now reached preschool. What, and how much, should be taught to three and four-year-olds in nursery school? To illustrate more fully the academic nature of preschool classes today, I would like to describe three recent, and very real, experiences I have had as a professor of early childhood education.

A few days ago I walked into a kindergarten classroom to observe a student teacher in action. The room was large and pleasant. There was the inevitable housekeeping center and a well-supplied block center too. There was a spot for listening with six head phones. One corner of the room was carpeted and appeared to be the place where children could sit on the floor and listen as the teacher read a story. Toys and games were in evidence on shelves around the room. However, none of the equipment or facilities described were being used during my visit.

When I arrived, the children were just coming in from an outside play period, recess, in other words. After taking off jackets and caps and hanging them in their assigned spots, the children took their seats at four tables-each with six or seven children around them. Their names were displayed on the back of the chairs.

Math worksheets were passed out and the student teacher directed them to look at the pictures. The first picture was of four birds, in the next frame across the page two birds were shown flying away, in the last frame only two birds remained on the original branch. Kim, the student teacher, talked them through the exercise. "How many birds do you see in the first picture?" They circled the number four. "Now look, two birds are flying away, now let's look at the last picture. How many birds are left?" The children dutifully answered two, and the numeral was appropriately circled.

Several more frames were done together and then the children were told to complete the page and do the other side in the same manner. They set about their task while the student teacher walked about helping individual children who were having difficulty, "shushing" those who had many things to say to their neighbors, and warning others to keep their eyes on their own papers.

When all were finished, and some got quite restless before everyone had completed the assignment, they went over the whole business together. Kim moved about putting "smiley faces" on those pages that were all correct.

Then it was time for reading. Three groups were given assignments. One group was to go back to the carpeted area to work with the student teacher while the other two groups remained in their seats at the tables with workbook pages to complete and a picture to color.

I didn't stay much longer, but even as I was writing up the observation form I am required to leave for the student teacher I was thinking about the scene I had just witnessed. This kindergarten situation would never have been possible twenty years ago.

Substraction with pre-operational children! Workbooks and reading groups! All of this has come about recently. Kindergarten has certainly changed dramatically.

HEAD START

Several months ago I visited a Head Start classroom. I have been closely involved with Head Start for a number of years and served as Director for the University-sponsored program for three years. While I am no longer the Director, I still like to stay in touch with the local program.

On this day, I arrived un-announced and the room was full of busy children. The classroom is small-too small, but Head Start takes what it can get. These rooms are in an old school building no longer used by the local school system. A few school offices are located in the old building, the two classrooms rented by Head Start plus a preschool handicapped classroom. Every effort has been made to convert these old dilapidated rooms into a cheerful environment for young children.

Three little girls sat at a table "reading" books. Two boys were working puzzles at another table. Five children were with the assistant teacher having a PEEK lesson. They were all involved with Mr. Pazoo and Ohno, the puppets. The remaining five children were at the third table in the room and the teacher was giving instructions on how to complete a worksheet.

It was a teacher-made worksheet that had been dittoed. There was a large two at the top; there were two circles; two squares and two triangles and at the bottom were some lines on which the child was to practice writing the numberal two. First the teacher told them to write their names on the paper. Nancy, the teacher, emphasized recognizing the two and understanding what two meant. They held up two fingers. Two children stood up. Two pencils and

two crayons were shown. The circles, squares, and triangles on the paper were discussed then the teacher told the children to take their red crayon and color the two circles red. With a little peeking at other's papers and a little mind-changing the job got done. Next they had to select green and color the two triangles. Finally they did the two squares with blue.

Then the five earnest little students struggled with the toughest part of their worksheet, writing the twos at the bottom on the lines provided.

A parent volunteer took over at this point because the teacher was called to the phone. The mother became increasingly impatient with the lack of coordination displayed by one little boy. He was small and appeared to be younger that the others. The mother got a little cross and said, "Since you can't make a two right, turn your papers and practice some more. All of you should write twos on the back--as many as you can."

The little boy having difficulty clenched his pencil and appeared near tears. He struggled on but never made a two that satisfied his temporary teacher. Finally the group was rescued when the assistant teacher completed her group lesson and announced it was time for all to get ready for outdoor play. With an almost palpable sense of relief, the small boy and his fellow sufferers put away papers, pencils, and crayons and ran for the wraps.

Once again I pondered--Children of four, and perhaps even three, not only learning to identify and say their numbers but trying to write them on worksheets. It was a rather demanding lesson--colors, shapes, and numbers plus the writing requirements.

NURSERY SCHOOL

The third visit I want to describe could be one of several. I could take you to our University early childhood center which provides day care and also a part-day nursery school experience but I think we shall visit a private

nursery school where I occasionally place ECE students for practicum or internship.

This little school is owned and run by one teacher. She is certified and has years of experience. She can only take ten at a time since space is a real problem. The basement of her house is the location of her school. Children enter through a garage and must go through the teacher's laundry room. Once inside the classroom space is limited but the area is bright and colorful. Children's work is generously displayed. Toys and games are much in evidence. A piano takes up one entire corner of the small room.

This is a small nursery school but much in demand. Since the teacher can take only ten at one session, middle-class parents in the neighborhood line up to get their child enrolled early. The school has been in existence for a number of years and enjoys an excellent reputation among local parents.

The teacher was still greeting the last arrivals when I appeared. As the children met in the classroom they picked out favorite toys and activities and started playing together. All nine children - one was absent - seemed to know each other well and were very comfortable in their little school.

After about twenty minutes a note on the piano brought them all to a semi-circle by the piano and they sang some songs with vigor and enthusiasm. They were obviously showing off for me but I was an appreciative audience. The teacher talked about the plans for the day and then they went through their entire repetoire of finger plays again for my benefit.

The big project for the day was to be writing an experience story. This seemed to be a familiar activity. The teacher got out a large flip-pad and the children gathered around. There seemed to be a well-established routine. The story was going to be about "favorite toys". The story began--"We all have favorite toys". From there each child contributed a line about his own favorite toy. The large sheet of paper was soon completely filled.

They read it over several times and I was surprised when two four-year-old girls quickly read it without missing a beat. The teacher asked if they would all like to take a copy of the story home to read to their parents. The children agreed this would be a good idea and while the children returned to their playing, the teacher quickly typed up the story on a primary typewriter and then ran off ten copies on an old-fashioned hecktograph pad.

When the stories were ready the group gathered around to get their own copy of their original story. The same two little girls who had read the story from the chart earlier seemed delighted to have their own copy of the story and they read it over to each other several times. The other children looked at it, set it aside and went back to more interesting things like blocks, clay, and puzzles.

This group of children come from professional parents with very high educational aspirations for their children. Even so, upon reviewing the hour-long visit with its emphasis on creative writing and reading it was quite obvious that not all four-year-olds are equally ready for reading by any means.

However, there appears to be a "snowballing" national trend toward all kinds of learning for young children and even infants. Parents want their child to be able to swim, dance, do gymnastics, play the violin, and read--all before the age of six (Newsweek, March 28, 1983). Since I live and work in South Dakota, I wanted to discover if this trend is as prevalent in South Dakota as elsewhere? In an effort to discover what parents really want their children to be taught in preschool classrooms a questionnaire was sent to parents with children in nursery school, day care centers, and Head Start programs through South Dakota.

PARENT SURVEY

As the parent of a young child who is, or has been recently, in a preschool program (nursery school, day care, Head Start) your opinion on what you want to be taught in early childhood classes is needed. Please indicate on the statements below the response which comes closest to what you want for your own child.

	Very Necessary	Necessary	Unnecessary	Completely Unnecessary
Please circle the most appropriate number:	1	2	3	4
1. Teaching phonics and the alphabet	26%	49%	21%	3%
2. Teaching counting and number recognition	34%	52%	13%	1%
3. Beginning hand-writing instruction	17%	44%	32%	7%
4. Sizeable blocks of time for freeplay	38%	51%	10%	1%
5. Learning to sit still, follow directions, and do seat work	45%	46%	7%	2%
6. Daily physical activities, exercise	59%	36%	5%	*
7. Language development through rhymes, games, finger-plays, songs, etc.	71%	29%	*	0
8. Teaching with manipulative materials such as clay and puzzles, etc.	56%	42%	2%	0
9. Books and stories read to young children daily	63%	35%	2%	0
10. Freedom to choose among varied activities	38%	53%	9%	1%
11. Creative art experiences with varied media - paint, crayons, etc.	55%	44%	1%	0
12. Teaching health, safety and nutrition	40%	54%	6%	1%

NOTE: * Less than 1%

The results of the survey reveal that parents in South Dakota, as elsewhere, want it <u>all</u> for their children. Three and four-year olds should receive the more traditional play experiences, but they need to begin reading, writing, and math, too, according to parents.

More specifically there were 701 responses from all areas of the state. The majority of these South Dakota parents agreed it was "necessary" or "very necessary" to teach everything on our survey. In fact, only two out of twelve items listed were considered "unnecessary" by more than 15% of the parents surveyed. Activities considered "unnecessary" were teaching phonics and the alphabet and beginning handwriting instruction.

In completing the survey, parents were given an opportunity to add their own ideas in regard to what should be taught in the preschool setting. Many took advantage of the opportunity and some interesting comments emerged. There was no question that kindergarten is, and should be, highly academic in the minds of these parents. Such comments as: "...the heavy academic program should begin at the kindergarten level..." or "...they need to get ready for sitting still and doing seat activities so it's not totally foreign in kindergarten", were sprinkled throughout the survey.

Many parents felt very positive about the nursery school or day care their child attended and wanted to praise the teacher and staff. The did so frequently and generously. Many had specific concerns about the curriculum ranging from wanting more music instruction to more and better "finger coordination".

The largest segment of comments written by parents indicated that what they desired most for their child were "cooperation and working with others", "an emphasis on appropriate social skills--politeness, sharing, table manners, etc." or "...to learn the social skills necessary for an easier adjustment into kindergarten..." Over and over it was reiterated that positive social development was the most crucial element of a preschool program, yet the figures belie these earnest statements.

It appears that the only way parents' comments and responses can be synthesized is by repeating the statement made at the beginning of this article, today's parents want it <u>all</u> for their preschool children. Parents want them to be children and enjoy life; they want self-esteem promoted. Although they believe school should be fun and without undue pressure, parents want children to learn the skills they preceive as necessary prior to entering kindergarten. Early childhood educators have a difficult task

ahead if they hope to reverse the apparent trend toward structured academic teaching in the preschool years. I do not think these findings are confined or restricted to one state or region. This appears to be a national movement about which all educators concerned with ECE must give serious thought. Where do we go from here? A lot of serious study is needed before plunging further into a disastrously inappropriate preschool curriculum.